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SUBJECT: BOSNIA: LJUBIC STRIVES TO RALLY BIH CROATS AND
CURRY FAVOR WITH ZAGREB

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Summary

1. (SBU) Recent initiatives from Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)-1990 President Bozo Ljubic indicate that the campaign among Croats for the 2010 general elections is underway. Ljubic is reaching out -- thus far unsuccessfully -- to Croat academic and religious leaders, as well as other political parties, to determine the "Croats' future path," including on constitutional reform. Ljubic is also engaging Zagreb. Amid these developments is the focus among BiH Croat leaders on the Croatian Presidential elections and their impact on Zagreb's future relationship with the BiH Croats. End summary.

Ljubic Proposes Croat Forum to Unite Croat Cogniscenti

2. (SBU) At the HDZ-1990 Presidency session on October 30, party President Bozo Ljubic presented the idea of an All-Croat Forum, although HDZ-1990 VP Damir Ljubic told us on December 15 that HDZ-1990 is not optimistic that the Forum will be constituted by the end of 2009. The purpose of the Forum, according to HDZ-1990, would be to "define the Croats' future path," including on constitutional reform. The Forum would include the signatories to the September 2007 Kresevo Declaration (HDZ-BiH, HDZ-1990, and four smaller Croat parties), which, inter alia, declared that BiH's two-entity structure is untenable (reftel). The Croat party representatives in the BiH Parliament (HDZ-BiH and HDZ-1990) and the BiH Croat representatives in the Croatian Parliament (also HDZ-BiH and HDZ-1990) also would be invited to participate.

Ljubic Focusing on Religious Leaders

3. (SBU) The Forum would also include members of BiH Croat cultural, academic, and religious institutions. Damir Ljubic told us that Bozo Ljubic is focusing heavily on the Catholic Church and has already engaged Cardinal Vinko Puljic and two Franciscan provincials on the idea of the Forum. Damir Ljubic noted, though, that the Cardinal did not commit to back the project openly, expressing concern that Covic -- due to malice toward Bozo Ljubic or Covic's inability to claim the project as his own -- may not buy into it. According to Damir Ljubic, the Cardinal fears that if Covic does not

participate, the media may exploit the Forum as a means of demonstrating the "lack of Croat unity."

Croats Embrace Possible Croatian Declaration

¶4. (SBU) Dovetailing with the idea of a Croat Forum was a proposal for a formal declaration of support for BiH Croats from the Croatian Parliament (Sabor). Ivo Andric Luzanski, HDZ-BiH representative in the Sabor, told the Mostar-based daily Dnevni List that the Sabor would adopt by the end of December a declaration on the position of the Croat people in BiH. The draft declaration was considered at the latest session of the Committee on Croats Outside Croatia, on which all four Bosnian Croat representatives -- two from HDZ-BiH and two from HDZ-1990 -- serve. After the committee vote, however, the declaration was pulled indefinitely from the Sabor's agenda, while it is considered by the GoC. We understand that Croatian members of the Sabor informed Embassy Zagreb that they did not share the enthusiasm that their Bosnian colleagues had for the declaration. The media in Croatia has ignored the proposal.

¶5. (SBU) The proposed declaration would condemn the small number of Croat returnees to BiH, applaud any effort on constitutional reform "that would guarantee full equality of all constituent peoples of BiH," and call on representatives of all three ethnic groups in BiH to ensure respect for the rights of constituent peoples and minorities. An explanation attached to the declaration would characterize BiH as "two unitary and centralized entities with the complete domination of Serbs as the majority people in one entity and Bosniaks in the other, with the tendency to marginalize the Croat people." It would call for a new BiH Constitution as a

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"precondition for democratic development" and for BiH's ability to take its place in Euro-Atlantic institutions. It would conclude that Croats "because of ethnic cleansing and all consequences of the war were the most affected people in BiH" and that the return of Croats to BiH is in Croatia's strategic interest. The GoC has not yet, however, provided any comments on the draft declaration. MFA officials told Embassy Zagreb that it was the PM's office that had pulled the draft from this year's agenda and it was unclear when and if the declaration would be put back on the Sabor's agenda. If the PM's office ever decides to put the document back on the agenda, it will almost certainly tone down the more contentious points, so as not to undermine the GoC's efforts to support the EU-U.S. initiative on constitutional reform.

Upcoming Croatian Elections Captivate BiH Croats

¶6. (SBU) The campaigning ahead of the December 27 Presidential election in Croatia is also grabbing the attention of BiH Croat voters, as all major candidates have opened branches of their election headquarters in Mostar. (Note: Roughly 276,000 BiH citizens are registered to vote in national elections in Croatia. End Note.) BiH voters generally favor the more conservative HDZ, but this year the Bosnian Croat political parties -- and, therefore, the BiH Croat electorate -- are less clear on which candidate they support in Croatia. Officially, the two Bosnian HDZs support HDZ candidate Andrija Hebrang, but our sense is that unofficially, HDZ-BiH will pay Hebrang lip service while keeping the door open, especially since most polls put him in a distant fourth or fifth place for the first round. A number of other center right and right wing candidates, including Zagreb Mayor Milan Bandic who spent his formative years in BiH and is running as an independent, are also appealing for the diaspora vote.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Amid heightened tension among state-level politicians and visceral reactions to the HighRep's decision on Mostar (septel), any initiative among Croat leaders to unite around the concept of isolation from the other ethnic groups is a cause for concern. The Croat Forum is probably an attempt -- which will most likely be unsuccessful -- by Ljubic to curry favor with the religious and academic communities, as well as Croatian political leaders, ahead of the 2010 general elections in BiH. Ljubic is losing political ground to his main rival, HDZ-BiH Chairman Dragan Covic, whose positions have been becoming more nationalist recently. The declaration before the Croatian Sabor, if it were to pass as drafted by the BiH Croatian parties, would almost certainly spark a negative reaction among Bosniaks and Serbs in BiH. The fact that the Croatian Sabor removed the declaration from its agenda for this year, and the lack of media coverage this declaration is getting in Zagreb, suggest that the GoC is cautious about involving itself too heavily in BiH Croat affairs. However, Ljubic's behavior indicates that the election campaign among BiH Croat leaders is well underway and that we can expect them to embrace nationalist themes over the next year.

¶8. (U) Embassy Zagreb cleared this cable.

ENGLISH